

# Kunapipi

---

Volume 20 | Issue 3

Article 30

---

1998

## Poems

Thomas Reiter

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Reiter, Thomas, Poems, *Kunapipi*, 20(3), 1998.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol20/iss3/30>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: [research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

---

## Poems

### Abstract

THE OVERLOOK, REEF WORLD, BRETHREN OF SALT (Brigands' Cay, Bahamas)

# Thomas Reiter

## THE OVERLOOK

Elkhard Our Trail Man, they call him  
at the National Trust. Today he slashes  
through strangler vines, positions stone  
against erosion, and brings down  
deadfall limbs to reach the overlook  
where the master of a sugar estate  
and his wife and children are buried  
under raised marble slabs, the grounds  
untended for two centuries.

Gathering flower seeds and rootstock  
for their garden, Elkhard and his wife  
discovered the tombs. In this plot  
of Antillean hummingbirds they  
surprised each other and made love  
on Willem Leverock, b. 1745 d. 1780,  
did rubbings of his coat of arms  
with their bare skin while plumes  
of the censerbush blessed them.  
That night she woke him, gasping  
from her dream in which a chattel gave birth  
alone on the master's vault,  
her womb flowing over the legend.

Elkhard's done his reading.  
The slaves who rose against Leverock  
and fired his estate while the family slept  
were run to this headland by hounds.  
Each rebel killed himself in turn.  
The last in the circle broke every weapon  
but the one he turned on himself.  
To reward those trackers,  
planters castrated the dead  
then pitched their bodies into the sea  
and hallowed this place with marble.

He drives home a sign warning  
not to touch the manchineel tree  
– lean against it and the sap will raise  
lash welts – then heads down the path,

stops only to pick some horse-tail, a weed  
body slaves employed to whisk  
their masters and mistresses clean  
after bowel movements. The bristles  
will lie under glass with cane  
cutlasses and talking drums in the new  
museum between the duty-free mall  
and the Emancipation Memorial.

## REEF WORLD

1.

Trevor, the patch above his shirt pocket says,  
and he has come down the spiral stairway  
from the aquarium to the sea floor,  
where he's alone this early hour.

Through the observatory's window wall  
he views geisha fans moving in the current.  
Farther, at the limit of vision,  
palisades of coral allow a single gap,

a surge channel in which at any moment  
the obscurity might darken  
and a shark or manta ray or moray eel  
come through. On the far side the bottom

falls away to where he once dived  
like his Carib and Arawak ancestors,  
a depth intense as the blueing  
his mother uses to whiten his Sunday shirt.

2.

He keeps the pumps running at Reef World,  
cleans the tanks and carries out the dead  
because a year ago, free-diving  
the palisades after lobster for Club Med,

he caught his hand in a keyhole crevice,  
felt his intestines twist like  
a towel wrung out till at last he could only  
stare into the depths at blueness

congealing as it rose to take him.  
 Divers freed him from those coral teeth,  
 and the next day he awoke to the man he is now,  
 lame in one leg and unable to speak.

3

Above him in the circular aquarium  
 where placards identify sea life,  
 fourth-graders in brown and white uniforms  
 pause at each tank: polyps build upon

their own stony dead – parapet, elkhorn,  
 brain ... A sea cucumber vacuums the floor,  
 veering among spiny urchins, extracting  
 nutrition, then passes the sand in a cloud

of children's giggles ... Macaroni  
 gliding on splayfeet, anemones uncoil  
 stingers on their heads ... Look! Teacherfish  
 frowns as hermit crabs contest a shell ...

Closing the circle, parasite fish rise  
 from orange coral to pour over a grouper  
 and for that service live to tell about it  
 in the placard a child reads aloud.

4.

On the sea floor the only movement's  
 in fronds and whips and fans ... but now,  
 sponging handprints off the window, Trevor  
 winces as inchlings flare toward him

like sparks from a grinding wheel:  
 as though viewed through a scrim, something  
 appears in the reef gap then withdraws. Soon  
 children will descend the spiral flight

to stand at the glass wall and wait.

## BRETHREN OF SALT

(Brigands' Cay, Bahamas)

On the ridge between tidewrack and abandoned  
salina, the shapes you can spot  
from open water – pirate lookouts? –  
are a few spinebushes bulked up with  
deposits from the trade wind skimming  
the salt pan turned catarrhal by a rain squall.

In 1700, English deserters from indenture  
settled this coral outcropping,  
piped seawater over the ridge  
with bilge pumps – what salt is here now  
comes from storm surges flooding the pan –  
then let the Tropic of Cancer  
reduce the brine till they could rake it  
into dunes Dutchmen needed in the holds  
of herring fleets, so traded arms for.

"Where is the clause in Adam's will  
saying the Caribbean is a Spanish lake?"  
A galleon's captain would be greeted  
with that challenge because beacons  
atop the ridge had drawn him  
from the sealane onto a sand bank.  
The Brethren of Salt came aboard  
tricked out in velvets and leather doublets,  
with hemp fuses lit for the ship's  
magazine and dangling from their beards.

They provisioned sailors in the longboats  
but every officer got salted  
with blunderbuss chambers of royal coin:  
"In the sweet trade, no prey, no pay."  
The loot found under stone ballast? Pearls,  
conserves, ingots, silver church plate.  
Till 1720, when a Spanish fleet  
cannonaded the island and left grapeshot  
mementos you can pry from coral.

On the ridge between breakers and salina,  
where spinebushes stand like coast  
watchers, the Brethren were tied to stakes,  
eviscerated and stuffed with salt  
and with handbills indicting them of  
"innumerable insolencies, lamentable incendiums."